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Current JIC trends
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The good news is the Unified Command is learning how to make better use of the Joint Information Center (JIC), especially the US Coast Guard for marine incidents. It's a sign the JIC concept is maturing. Public affairs people in regulatory agencies generally have a good grip on the JIC system and understand how it benefits them, and usually are willing to cooperate with industry and other agencies in a joint effort. There are still some exceptions, and some may never embrace the joint concept. JIC plans have matured, and although there still are many variations floating around, they generally agree on the basics: working together to get accurate information out and staying flexible in organization and structure. Almost every PR person who might be expected to work in a JIC knows how, either through experience or training and exercises.

The bad news is there is still reluctance by some companies to embrace the JIC concept. This seems rooted in a misperception that cooperating in a JIC means giving up the company's ability to tell its own story. That root runs deep, to the olden days of decades ago when companies in trouble often said little or nothing publicly. The lesson was learned painfully: tell your own story, especially the bad news, yourself; don't let someone else do it for you. Now, companies are asked to turn that lesson on its head, and go into a JIC where decisions are made by consensus and information goes out in the name of the unified command. It is not turning that very valid lesson around, of course. The company's representatives in the JIC still have a voice in decisions and, if they disagree strongly, the company can still issue its own statement separately.

Branding may not be a good idea in a crisis. The JIC concept looks better to companies as they click to the fact that putting the company "brand" on an incident is seldom helpful. The branding theory is that people will be less anxious in an incident if they know Pertygood Pipeline Company is handling the response. That may reassure industry and regulatory agencies, who know the company, but few in the general public do, and even they are more likely to trust the Unified Command with its government reps than anything the company has to say by itself. The JIC assures consensus in public statements. Another benefit is the company name is less attached to negative news...sometimes not mentioned at all!

There is a trend away from deploying resources to the field. Initially, the trend was to buy more portable gadgetry and deploy more public communication tasks to the Command Post (CP). This has long since passed the point of diminishing returns. Faxing news releases from the CP requires a fax machine, a dedicated phone line, electric power, and a body, who must be transported, fed, housed, and provided workspace. It's more efficient to fax a news release out one time, and let someone in an office somewhere else do the mass distribution. Some functions, of course, *need* to be done within the CP, but many can be done better elsewhere. Our system is to deploy whatever we need to, but to keep some functions in the office, where we have more human and mechanical resources.

If you want a voice in the conclusion, be heard at the beginning. There is a tendency for companies to delay ramping up their PA response to an incident, to see whether it really is bad enough to warrant the effort. In the case of public affairs, what they lose by delaying is a credible voice at the back end, when the “how clean is clean” issue is being debated, for example. One of the early perceptions that is set is how clean the affected area will be when it’s all over. Even if the company and regulatory agencies are in agreement, theirs aren’t the only opinions that matter...local governments, activist groups, and ordinary citizens have their own opinions. If no one is shaping those expectations in the first few hours, they may differ dramatically from what the response team expects, and the politics of the situation mean the UC cannot simply ignore those expectations because they’re unrealistic. Begin building consensus for “how clean is clean” early and you have a better chance of seeing your definition adopted at the end, when you’re ready to declare victory and go home.

Who sits in the JIC? Certainly the public affairs representatives from any participating entity, but there is a great benefit to making room at the table for others, too. We’ve learned, for example, the advantage of inviting in an environmental activist (a carefully selected, rational one, not an anti-industry crazy). A caller with an enviro concern will lend that person more credibility than anyone else, least of all a company person. The enviro can counsel the JIC on issues and perceptions, and probably has helpful data, too. At the same time, from inside the CP the enviro rep can see what’s going on, knows the facts, understands decisions, and can pass that information along to the rest of the enviro community. The same works for neighborhood associations, municipalities, and other stakeholders. Often, they’re content merely to know that they know everything that’s going on...that they’re in the loop. Another benefit: each one is another body who can help work in the JIC.

What’s a news release? We use three very different formats, all generally under the heading of news releases. One is the familiar narrative release, with a headline and page or two of double-spaced text. They’re good for steering the story and setting the news agenda, but hardest to get through the approval process and slow to prepare. A second format is a data sheet, a running tally of lists and numbers, such as how many feet of boom are in the water, what environmentally sensitive place have been protected, numbers of cleanup workers on the beach, etc. They’re quick to prepare and easy to get approved, but they don’t guide the story, merely update facts. The third format is the fact sheet, a page or two on a single topic, which is prepared in advance and stored in the computer to be adapted to the immediate need without having to start from scratch. Examples include the different types of boom, how lightering works, and the pros and cons of in-situ burning.

How many participants does it take to make a JIC? In our book, two. In fact, we’ve worked in two-entity JICs many times. In a significant incident, there may be more than a dozen different entities represented. In most cases, there are far fewer and even then, some drop in and out as their level of concern rises and falls. “Joint” merely means there is more than one involved, and they agree to take off their company and agency hats and work in the name of the Unified Command instead of the names of their respective employers or clients. An outsider should not be able to tell whether a JIC represents the efforts of 2 entities or 20.